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“May the Force Be with You:” The “Animatistic Minimum” in the Mythological and Religious Consciousness

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When Christian missionaries came to North America during the epoch of great geographical discoveries, they were surprised to find out that the native peoples had no concept of the Western notion of God; the idea of a Supreme Being was altogether foreign to them and was replaced by the belief in an invisible, mysterious, and impersonal force inherent in people, animals, lifeless subjects, filling with itself the world surrounding the person and causing all his life. The Eskimos name this force *sila* (or *khila*) using a word similar to the Russian word *sila*, that is “a force.” The Iroquois call it *orenda*, among the Algonquin a different word is used for this force, *manitou*, which bears the same meaning. The same force is also known under the name of *wakan* or *wakanda* among the Sioux, *poknut* among the Shoshone, *yek* among the Tlinkit, *sgâna* among the Haida, and *nauala* among the Kwakiutl. But such a belief is not peculiar to the indigenous peoples of North America, and it may be observed in the internal areas of Africa, Southeast Asia, and Oceania.

The same concept is found among the Malaysians as *kramat*, among the Indo-Chinese tribes as *deng*, as *megbe* among the African Pygmies, as *njama* among the tribes of Western Sudan, and as *umoja* among the Zulu. In Santa Cruz the word *malete* is used; at Saa in Malante all persons and things in which this supernatural force resides are said to be *saka*, that is “hot.” Additionally, among the peoples of Oceania—the Melanesians and Polynesians—the impersonal force is known as *mana*. As the American scholars Robert H. Lowie and Robert. R. Marett both cogently argued, somewhat similar concepts exist in religious systems as far apart as the Crow and Iroquois of America and the Ekoi of Africa.

It is in Melanesia that the belief in an impersonal force was studied for the first time. The English ethnographer and missionary Robert Codrington was the first to describe in detail the belief in *mana*. His book *The Melanesians* appeared in 1891 and, after it had been recognized that all of the above mentioned terms are the exact equivalent of the Melanesians’ *mana*, this name was introduced by Robert Marett in 1915 as a common term to denote all the variations of an impersonal force represented in different non-Western religions.

According to Codrington *mana* is a supernatural power of influence belonging to the region of the unseen. He writes: “This is what works to effect everything which is beyond the ordinary power of men, outside the common processes of nature, it is present in the atmosphere of life, attaches itself to persons and to things, and is manifested by results which can only be ascribed to its operation. When one has got it he can use it and direct it, but its force may break forth at some new point.”¹ The life and social position of every person are supposed to depend on *mana*. He becomes a chief by the virtue of *mana*. If a man is successful in fighting it means that he has got *mana*. If his pigs multiply and gardens are productive, it is not because he is industrious but because the stones in his garden are full of *mana*.

The French sociologist Emile Durkheim, describing the beliefs of the Native American tribes and especially the Sioux, writes that the force *wakan* “is not a definite and definable power,

¹ Robert Codrington, *The Melanesians: Studies in Their Anthropology and Folklore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891), 119-120.

the power of doing this or that; it is a power in absolute sense, with no epithet of determination of any sort. The various divine powers are only particular manifestations and personifications of it; each of them is this power seen under one of its numerous aspects.”² Taking the words in a larger sense, one may say that it is the god adored by each totemic cult, however, it is a god in a specific sense. “Yet,” Durkheim writes, “it is an impersonal god, without name or history, immanent in the world and diffused in an innumerable multitude of things.”³

As a rule, *mana* is perceived as something ambiguous, ambivalent; it cannot be considered only useful or only harmful to the person. However, sometimes it is supposed to be only nocuous, as, for example, *arunkult* among the Australian tribe aranda or *onim* among the Papuans of New Guinea.

Robert Marett and Bronislaw Malinovsky consider the belief in an impersonal force, or, animatism, as historically the first form of religious consciousness and, moreover, as “a minimum of religion” in general, which is kept by all later religions. To delineate a belief in impersonal forces Marett suggested the taboo-*mana* formula which was also adopted by him for his own minimum definition of religion. He defined this kind of belief by the term “animatism” to distinguish it from what Edward B. Taylor called “animism,” that is a belief in supernatural beings.

As to the objections pointing out that people of primitive societies are unable to suggest any abstract concept of the impersonal force Durkheim writes that they do not represent this force in an abstract form, on the contrary, under the influence of some causes they have been led to conceive it under the form of an animal, or of vegetable species, or, in a word, of a visible object.

The fact that *mana* can be embodied in different objects and can be conveyed from one possessor to another, flowing through every living and nonliving thing keeping its magic properties, has led the German scholar K. Oberhuber to conclude that it has a totemic origin, and, in Durkheim’s opinion, “totemism is the religion, not of such and such animals or men or images, but of an anonymous and impersonal force found in each of these

² Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (London: Allen and Unwin), 193.

³ Ibid., 189.

beings but not to be confounded with one of them. No one possesses it entirely, and all participate in it. It is so completely independent of the particular subjects in whom it incarnates itself, that it precedes them and survives them.”⁴

In this connection it seems to me, that the idea of impersonal force has become one of the major archetypes of mythological and religious consciousness, or, so to speak, “an animatistic minimum,” whose presence in culture and spirituality of the subsequent millennia has manifested itself in a wide range—from a level of household and ceremonial magic up to a level of deep philosophical thoughts and concepts.

The presence of this archetype in polytheism is proven by the Sumerian concept of *me*, a powerful mysterious force operating the world of gods and people and, like *mana*, capable of incarnating itself in different objects. The meaning of the word *me* is similar to that of the Sumerian verb of existence *me* (“to be”); actually, it is the same word. It is remarkable, that the Indo-Iranian name of the magic force *maya* has taken its origin in the verb *man* (“to think”), and the second part of the word, *-ya*, whatever etymology it has, is associated with the old Indian verb *ya* (“to go”). The German linguist Wilhelm Humboldt writes that the radical *ya-* is actively used in word-formation. In this case, *maya* may be understood as a movement of the thought.

It is curious that a lot of terms used by different cultures to denote an impersonal force has the phoneme *m* either at the beginning of the word (*malete*, *mana*, *manitou*, *maya*, *me*, *megbe*) or in the middle of it (*kramat*, *njama*, *umojá*). The Algonquin’s *manitou* is consonant with the Melanesians’ *mana*, which in turn completely coincides with a word from one of the Near-Eastern texts written in the Mandaean language in 400 A.D. and containing the following phrase: “I swear by the great Mana.” In this context, the term *Mana* is supposed to have originated in the above-mentioned verb *man* (“to think”). Of course, these facts are no more than mere coincidences, but they deserve to be mentioned here.

Just like the Sumerian term *me* combining the meanings of a noun and a verb, the word *mana* is both a noun substantive and a

⁴ Ibid., 188.

verb; a transitive form of the verb, *manag*, *manahi*, *managi*, means to impart *mana*, or to influence with it. Codrington writes: “An object in which *mana* resides, and a spirit which naturally has *mana*, is said to be *mana*, with the use of the verb; a man has *mana*, but cannot properly be said to be *mana*.”⁵

In my opinion, similar word usage can be found among the Algonquin. According to the Christian priest father Alluets, in 1670 he was allowed into a remote Algonquin village in which white men had never been seen before. The Algonquin were amazed to see his white skin and black attire and took him neither for a human being, nor for a deity, but for an embodiment of the divine force *manitou*. He was invited to come into a wigwam where he was surrounded by several old Indians. One of them came nearer to the priest with two handfuls of tobacco, which many Native American tribes used for sacrifice, and addressed him with the following words: “It is very good, Black Dress, that you have visited us. Manifest your favour to us. You are Manitou. We shall give you some tobacco.”

The archetypal significance of the belief in an impersonal force may be proven by the factor of historical succession. Under the influence of Sumerian beliefs, the Elamic concept of the magic force *kiten* inherent in deities has arisen. The Akkadian concept of the tables of destiny has also originated in *me*.

Similar views and their similar evolution may also be found among the Indo-Iranian tribes. Like *mana* which is an ambiguous force, *maya*, as has been shown by the French scholar L. Renou, is also ambivalent. In the Rig-Veda it is said to be, on the one hand, “supernatural wisdom” or “a magic force of transformations” when it concerns gods and, on the other hand, “magical charms,” “deceit” when it concerns demons and enemies. In the Iranian mythological and poetical tradition the divine entity *khvarno*, or *pharn*, is also ambivalent. As a rule it is supposed to bring riches and authority to people, however, the notion of “bad *pharn*” is not foreign to the Iranians. While possessing *mana* makes one a chief, having *pharn* makes one a king, gives him supreme, imperial authority. *Khavrno* is considered both as an impersonal sacral entity—a sort of impersonal anonymous force—and as a

⁵ Codrington, *The Melanesians*, 119.

personified divine character, which also resonates with the belief in an impersonal force capable of filling with itself different subjects and objects. It can be possessed by deities and people for whom it, as well as *mana*, is embodied in the house, family, health, cattle. Just like *me* which can be owned by cities and temples, *khvarno* can be incarnated in the settlement, area, and country. The term *pharn* shows the same way of the semantic development that the term *me*. If the notion of *me* has produced the tables of destiny, *pharn* is perceived as happiness, fate or destiny. As the English specialist in Zoroastrianism, Mary Boyes points out that *khvarena* (one of the forms of the word *pharn*) is often associated with the goddess of destiny Ashi. This name in the Zend language corresponds with the word *asha* or *rta (arta)*, the latter being characteristic of Indo-Aryan tribes, meaning the general law, the natural order of things, which resembles, in essence and phonetically, the Chinese notion of *Tao* (“Way”). It seems to me that *asha* is to *khvarno* what *Tao* is to *te*: *Tao* gives rise to things, and *te* rears, cultivates, improves them—that is, operates like an impersonal vital force. Generally speaking, the English equivalent for *te* is the word *power* and the title of the Chinese treatise *Tao-te ching* reads in English as *The Book of the Way and Its Power*.

Pharn taken in the sense of destiny is often compared to the Greek goddess *Tikhe* and to the Roman goddess *Fortuna*. Therefore, the concept of an impersonal force, when incorporated into more “developed” religions, is exposed to some transformations: first this force begins to be perceived as destiny, and then it is personified in a female image. *Maya* in the Post-Vedaic period is not only considered as the illusiveness of life (as in Vishnuism) which is connected with one of its meanings displayed in the Rig-Veda (that is, deceit, charms, illusion), but *maya* is also identified with a divine woman, sometimes with the goddess *Durga*.

I think that the gradual personification of an impersonal force in a female image may be observed and proven with the use of linguistic data. The Latin words *Fortuna* and *fors* (“a case”), on the one hand, and the words *fortitudo* (“force”) and *fortis* (“strong”) have originated in the same radical. The name *Eva* meaning, in the Semitic languages, “life,” goes back to the Nostratic radical *haju* (“a vital force”); it should be added that the

Nostratic language is the oldest language of the Eurasian continent which existed before its division into the Indo-European, Semitic, Altai, and other languages. арии

The Iranian entity *khvarno* has some features in common with the force *manitou* of the Algonquin of North America. One of the meanings of the term *khvarno*, “light,” “shine,” correlates it to sunlight (the Vedaic word *svar* which is related to the word *khvarno* also means “light,” “shine,” “sun”; of the same radical are the name of the Slavic god of fire *Svarog* and the Greek word *charisma* meaning, first, a special personal quality or power of an individual making him capable of influencing or inspiring large numbers of people, and, secondly, a quality inherent in a thing which inspires great enthusiasm and devotion). In general fire was one of the major objects of worship among the Indo-Aryan tribes. It is from fire that *khvarno* has come into Zarathustra’s mother. The American ethnographer Lewis Spence, in his book *The Myths of the North American Indians*,⁶ points out that the Native American’s “theology” originated in their views of sunlight. Their initial notions of a divine force were the same that those characteristic of the primitive peoples of Europe and Asia. The Native American’s concept of a god was the idea of a great powerful force residing in the sky and manifesting itself in sunshine. A connection between the idea of an impersonal force and the cult of fire can be shown with the above mentioned term *saka* (“hot”), meaning a person or thing in which the impersonal force resides. The Tokhar word *muk*, meaning “a magic force,” is paronymous with the Indo-European words meaning “fire,” for example, with the Latin word *ignis*.

The archetype of an impersonal force is also present in the philosophical concepts in which not a personified deity, but an abstraction, general idea, or impersonal immanent divinity diffused in the phenomena of the world is declared to be a subject of cult. Such a theory was developed by the American thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emphasizing this feature of Emerson’s transcendental idealism, William James writes, in his work *The*

⁶ Lewis Spence, *The Myths of the North American Indians* (London: George G. Harrap & Co, 1914).

Varieties of Religious Experience,⁷ that in America there are many churches without God that are called ethical societies or moral unions and in which people worship abstract concepts and general ideas. This fact, which has become an important feature characteristic of the American mentality, makes James suggest a broad interpretation of the term *divinity*, understanding it as a sort of general quality. That Americans are inclined to operating general ideas to a larger extent than their English ancestors is pointed out by the French thinker Alexis de Tocqueville, in his work *Democracy in America*.⁸ He specifies that this inclination has been expressed, first of all, in pantheism.

In my opinion, pantheism undoubtedly contains, in a rudimentary form, the above mentioned “animatistic minimum.” The dissolution of God in the world bears a close similarity to the dissolution of an impersonal force in it. According to de Tocqueville, the spreading of pantheism is accounted for by the equalizing of conditions under which people live in a democratic society, which induces them to speculate not of separate facts, but of all their multitude as a whole and to reduce different consequences to one reason. People of a democratic epoch continuously invent abstract words and personify their meanings, forcing them to act like real persons. Such phrase as, for example, “the natural course of things demands that the world be governed by endowments” would be, in de Tocqueville’s opinion, quite natural for them.

Of course, this enthusiasm for general ideas may partially be accounted for by contacts of the new and Native Americans. On the one hand, Christian preachers, trying to adapt local beliefs for their own concepts of God, have transformed the impersonal force *orenda* or *wakanda* into a personified image of Great Spirit; on the other hand, American colonists adjoining to the Native American culture, have apprehended to some extent the beliefs particular to the Native Americans.

However, a more significant role in forming this inclination to abstract ideas belongs to the archetype of an impersonal force as

⁷ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982).

⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

a “minimum of religion” in general. The French sociologist Raimon Aron sees the cause that has originated clan totemism based on the belief in an impersonal force in the recognition of the sacral which appears to be a force borrowed from the collectivity and surpassing all the individuals. We can draw, thus, a conclusion that, having turned into an archetype, the idea of impersonal force starts to cause an effect. It is society that becomes a true object of worship, it is sociality that embodies in itself an impersonal and anonymous force identified with divinity.

Perhaps it is this inclination toward general ideas and abstract concepts that has led George Lucas to the idea of the Force developed in his *Star Wars* series. The Force is viewed as a metaphysical, binding, and ubiquitous power that is behind the Jedi and Sith monastic orders. Both the Jedi and the Sith use the Force to gain their power. Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi describes it as follows: “The Force is what gives a Jedi his power. It’s an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us, penetrates us, and binds the galaxy together.”⁹ There are two different views of the Force among the characters of the *Star Wars* series and among admirers of the movie. Some of them think of the Force as a non-corporeal sentient entity that may be capable of intelligent thought—almost as if it were a sort of Chinese *chi*—while others simply consider it something that can be manipulated and used as though it were a tool.

It is widely recognized that:

The principles of the Force resonate with those of some real world religions, including the Shinto religion of Japan, Buddhism, and certain Celtic druidic concepts. The Force is also supposed to bear a close similarity to the Chinese notion of *qigong*, or *chi*, and the splitting of the Force into light side and dark sides echoes the concept of *Yin* and *Yang* in Eastern philosophy (though this is not a perfect translation, as the dark side is considered a force of evil by the Jedi and this moral duality is not the same as the Eastern concept). Along with the concepts of *Yin* and *Yang*, the concept of a ubiquitous Force is concurrent to the real

⁹ *Star Wars Episode IV – A New Hope*. DVD, directed by George Lucas, 1977, Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2006.

world concept of a *Tao* or *Way*, which is said to flow everywhere in the universe. The concept of the Force also borrows heavily from Hindu theology, which also expresses a belief in a unifying Brahman energy that composes and is a composite of the Universe (and by extension, God), and can be used for either good or bad. In fact, this is particularly similar to the concept of the Potentium and the Unifying Force in that while the power can be perverted for evil, it ultimately leads only to a conclusion that is good. A connection is drawn to Zoroastrianism with the duality of the Force. The dichotomy between Ahura Mazda (the One God) and Angra Mainyu/Ahrima (the evil spirit) is nearly identical to the concept of the light and dark sides of the Force. . . . Generally speaking, the Force is considered as an amalgamation of many religions and philosophies, and is intended as a metaphor for spirituality itself.¹⁰

It is strange, however, that the concept of an impersonal force, *mana*, is not mentioned in the numerous lists of beliefs which this idea is supposed to resonate with.

In my opinion, it is not with *chi* or any other above-mentioned phenomenon but with *mana* that the Force has many traits in common. Let us compare what has already been said of *mana* to what is known about the Force. Obi-Wan Kenobi's definition of the Force is somewhat similar to the above quoted definition of *mana* suggested by Robert Codrington. Like *mana* the Force works to affect everything which is beyond the ordinary power of men: it is present in the atmosphere of life, and attaches itself to persons and to things, flowing through every living thing. It partially exists inside the life forms that use it, and draws energy from their emotions.

The Force is ambivalent, it is divided into two aspects: the light side and the dark side. These aspects are concerned with the moral compass of the Force in its various manifestations. The light side of the Force is the facet aligned with good, benevolence, and healing, while the dark side of the Force was the element aligned

¹⁰ <<http://starwars.wikia.com>>

with fear, hatred, aggression, and malevolence.

The Force is also divided into two more aspects: the Unifying Force, which essentially embraces space and time in its entirety, and the Living Force, which deals with the energy of living things. This refers us to the combination of a natural order and impersonal force which is characteristic of many religions and is represented as has already been shown in the notion of *asha* and *khvarno* or *Tao* and *te*.

It is important to note that a major property of the impersonal force with an important archetypal significance is its fluidity, liquidity which enables it to be poured in the world and allows one to associate it with water. Additionally, the English word *force* means both “power” and “a waterfall” or “a cascade.” The concept of *mana* has been developed by the islanders living among oceanic waters. The Sumerian force *me* resides at the depths of the underground ocean of fresh waters Absu, a secret place which is inaccessible even for gods. Only goddess Inanna has managed to steal *me* from the owner of Abzu, god of wisdom Enki. One of main objects of worship among the Indo-Iranians, alongside with fire, was water. In Zend it is spoken of *khvarno* hidden at the depths of waters. To the Ocean which has a lot of names depending on what coast it washes, Emerson compares the Spirit generating everything in the world and getting in its different manifestations the names of Love, Truth, or Good. If the person departs from these coasts, he will be deprived of power and support and his being will get narrower and narrower. Here, we can draw one more parallel with the religion of Zend. The concept of *asha* or *rta* is multiple-valued: with respect to the world of things it is a sort of natural order, and in an ethical sense it means in principle what Emerson speaks of. And at last as Luke Skywalker says in the *Star Wars*, “The Force is a river from which many can drink, and the training of the Jedi is not the only cup which can catch it.”

So, the basic properties of an impersonal force are its sacral character, impersonality, liquidity, and ambivalence. It is curious, that if combining the initial letters of these words, we will get the Russian word *sila*, that is “a force.”

The above mentioned facts show that the old beliefs in an impersonal force are present in later religions as an archetype

defining many important components of mythological and religious consciousness and even of social consciousness as a whole.

The well-known phrase from the *Star Wars* series “May the Force be with you” is not only the quintessence of the Jedi’s religion, but also the apotheosis of the archetypal being of the idea of an impersonal force in the modern world.